ORM Corner

We Don't Need No Stinkin' Rules, Do We?

By LCdr. Bruce Hay

This is the second time I've written to *Approach* about this particular flight. The first time was shortly after the flight happened almost eight years ago. In the years since, I have reflected on the only time I truly thought I was going to die in a naval aircraft.

The EA-6B community has gone through many changes since that memorable flight: no low-levels, no BFMC, FLE induced G restrictions, several mishaps and the eventual reintroduction of both low-level and BFMC flights. However, I believe the most significant change is the introduction of low-altitude awareness (LAA) and low-altitude tactical training (LATT). I am going to give you a quick narrative of the flight, then dissect it, using LATT rules.

The flight was the first leg in an all JO, low-level, cross-country throughout the western United States. We were going to RON at MCAS El Toro via the VR-249, with en-route stops at Mountain Home AFB via the IR-301, and NAS Fallon via the VR-1352. It was mid-December,

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and we had returned from deployment four months earlier. On the day of the flight, the weather was typical Pacific Northwest: low ceilings, rainy and cool. The weather en route was supposed to be better but not great until we got nearer to Fallon.

As briefed, I was the only one with a chart for the IR-301, and we ended up making Xerox copies of it for the pilot and the lone backseater. The quality of the copy wasn't great but adequate for everyone to use. Of course, I couldn't remember when the chart was made, nor CHUM'd. We finished the brief, packed up the jet, and took off like three kids with the keys to Dad's prized car.

The weather en route to the IR-301 entry point was as briefed: lots of layers with some breaks where the ground could be viewed. As we got closer, the rain turned to snow, and the ground was awash in white. At the time, the Air Force F-111s flew out of Mountain Home AFB. They were equipped with TFR, we were not. So, the local controller was a little perplexed as we asked for descent after descending to remain VFR. Finally, as we got close, we cancelled and descended through a thin overcast to enter the low-level. We sped up and flew the first leg with an overcast above us, mountains in front of us, and snow everywhere.

The first leg was uneventful until we approached point bravo and set up for a tactical ridge crossing. We inverted with a pull toward Mother Earth, and the excitement began. As we reached the apex of the ridgeline, we started our pull to fly into the valley. We were greeted by a whiteout. Blowing snow and zero visibility, combined with 450 knots of downward travel, brought us into the valley floor—only a few hundred feet below us. The pilot came immediately to the same conclusion as me, rolled upright, and pulled for the sun.

I dialed emergency in the IFF and stared directly at the radar altitude, fearing it would

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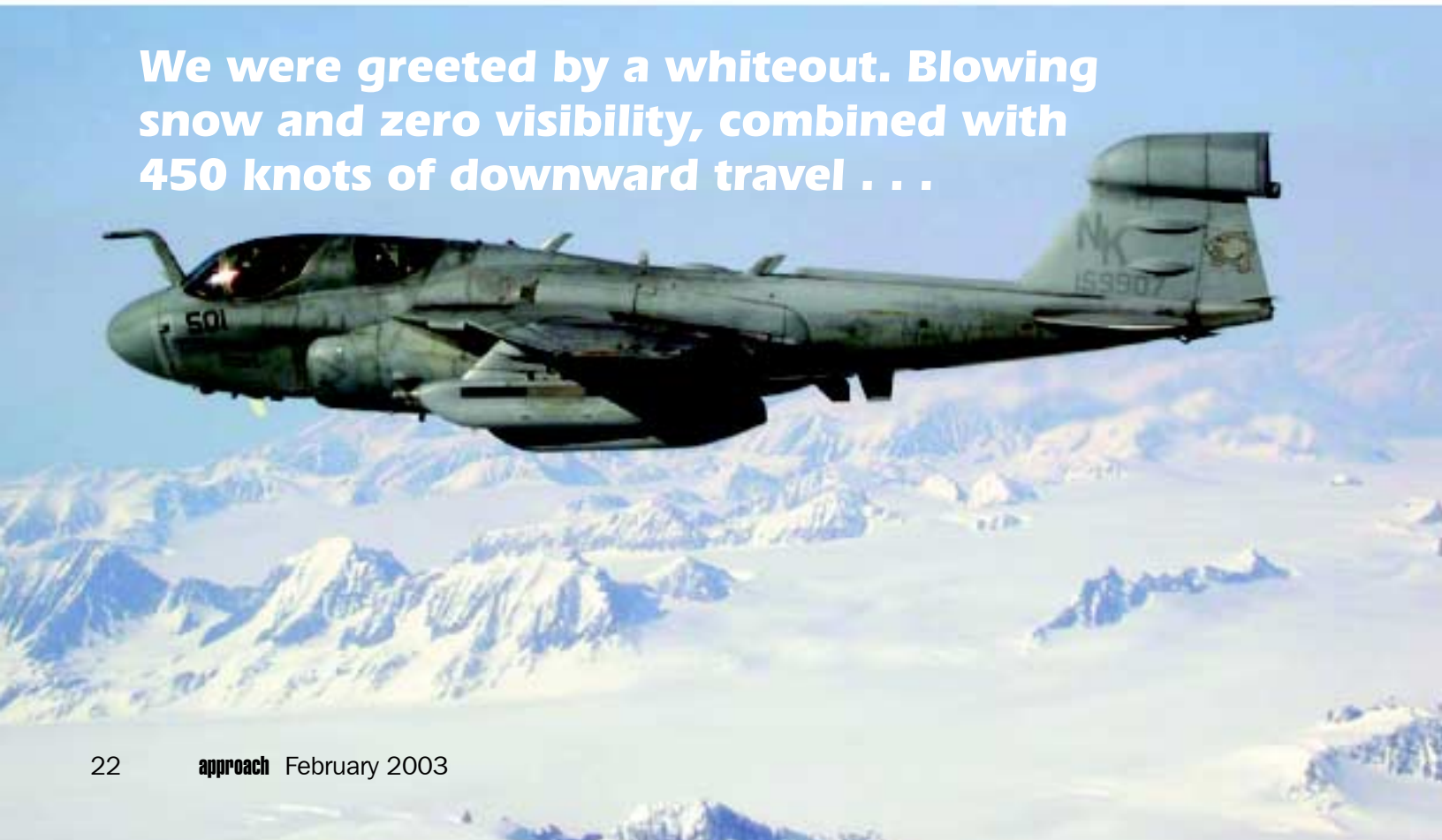

quickly swing to zero, a tone, and then a date with St. Peter. Instead of being a good copilot, I started talking to the local controller and asked for an IFR pickup. Aviate, navigate, and communicate. The pilot nearly departed the airplane on the top of our climb-out. The cockpit was silent, with nary a communication between any of us.

After a 30-minute, airways-navigation flight around Mountain Home to compose ourselves, we landed uneventfully and briefed for our next flight. Fortunately, that was the extent of the excitement for the cross-country, but it was enough. Now, using LATT rules, I'll point out where we could have saved ourselves a lot of heartache and a mishap waiting to happen.

Currency: The LATT rules for the EA-6B community call for at least one low-level flight for the pilot within 60 days, and 120 days for ECMOs. Having just returned from deployment four months earlier, we were low on OPTAR and jets. Looking at my logbook recently, I actually had flown a fair amount in the previous 15 days, but there wasn't a low-level anywhere to be seen in the 120-day timeframe. I was not crewed with the pilot or other ECMO, and none of us had completed any formal low-level training that is now an annual requirement.

Chart-Brief: We complied with current LATT rules with respect to thoroughly briefing the route. The IR-301 was a convenient excuse to make a "Scrubby's" run, a semi-famous BBQ place just outside the main gate at Mountain Home AFB, so we were familiar with the route. As I said earlier, the chart was neither current nor CHUM'd.

Weather: The rules are 3,000 feet and five miles visibility, which has to be continually reassessed throughout the route. Descents through overcast layer to achieve VMC, while not under positive IFR control, are prohibited. Clearly, we violated both rules here. It shouldn't take a rocket scientist to know a descent through weather in a mountainous area is never a good idea.

Maneuvering: Current guidance in the EA-6B LATT program is 500 feet AGL. We flew at 200 feet AGL, which was authorized at the time. It wasn't smart to be that low, considering the weather and terrain, but we weren't violating any rules. The training syllabus for achieving the LATT qualification now states that ridgeline crossings should not be done inverted. It is a lot more fun to be inverted but not tactically smart because of the amount of wing flashes involved. We again were in the wrong here.

Knock-It-Off-Terminate: For once, we used good headwork by climbing off the route and squawking emergency when it was obvious we no longer could continue on the route. Of course, we nearly departed the airplane in doing so, but at least we got one thing right.

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Last, I would be remiss if I failed to mention ORM. In December 1994, I'd never heard of it. The first time I remember anything significant about ORM was in 1997, when I was an instructor at the EA-6B FRS, and we were trying to implement ORM in the maintenance department. It's now one of the first things we consider before any flight, and, if we had used it before this flight, we probably never would have flown the first leg as a low-level. If we had, we would have been a lot better prepared for what was ahead.

I still think about this flight from time to time, for obvious reasons. We were three experienced aviators fresh from a deployment, and we nearly killed ourselves on a good deal cross-country. I am glad we now have LATT and ORM as cornerstones of our training and operational programs so no other EA-6B crew has to go through the same soul-searching I've done for the last eight years.

LCdr. Hay flies with VAQ-139.